

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **A-1**

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Democracy Gaining in El Salvador, U.S. Believes

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A hesitant consensus appears to be growing in the Reagan administration and Congress that the effort to preserve a democratic state in El Salvador is succeeding.

The five-year-old Salvadoran civil war has cost nearly 50,000 lives. Fighting and human rights abuses on both sides continue. U.S. aid to the Salvadoran government has totaled nearly \$2 billion since 1981, and it will have to continue at high levels for the foreseeable future. El Salvador's economy is shaky, the political extremes, though weakened, continue to operate, and 20 percent of the population has fled their homes.

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Critics charged that the number of U.S. advisers was being juggled by temporary assignments, that a new air base and gunships were provided with no warning, that the certifications were a whitewash of major abuses and that the administration was giving lip service to peace efforts while pressing a military solution. The war seesawed, and the administration secretly authorized covert action against neighboring Nicaragua in order, it claimed, to cut off Nicaragua's arms supply to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

El Salvador's March 1982 elections were a world media event, but they settled nothing. Instead, they increased the power of the Salvadoran far right, and the Reagan administration was accused of covering up evidence of death squad involvement by Roberto D'Aubuisson, leader of the opposition party ARENA. Abuses continued, but Reagan certified progress four times.

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In November, Reagan vetoed a renewal of the certification process in order, officials said, to make it clear to the Salvadoran armed forces that he didn't need Congress to push him on human rights. The U.S. Embassy began leaking names of death squad suspects, and Vice President Bush visited El Salvador in December to warn officials to clean up their act or face an aid cut-off.

"After that they believed us, but more importantly, the administration believed it, too," said a diplomat who served in El Salvador at the time.

The Kissinger commission reported in January 1984 that the guerrillas had legitimate grievances, although their Soviet backing threatened U.S. interests. It recommended massive economic and military aid, and in May Congress approved the first stage of such assistance when the House passed the bill by a four-vote margin.

The margin reflected the newness and the tentative nature of the convergence by Congress and the administration in a joint approach to El Salvador. It has persisted, with rough patches, since.

None of the officials interviewed said he thinks that the accord is guaranteed to survive, or that Duarte is guaranteed success in revitalizing his economy and achieving control of his armed forces. "The key is patience," Motley said.

Long remains among the most dubious. "If there's light at the end of the tunnel," he said, "it's a pretty long tunnel."